

# Bruno Capaci

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## The antidote to the fear : the rhetorical genres as a link between literature and society : Examples from Italian literature

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## Rhetoric in Italy

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**BRUNO CAPACI**

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

bruno.capaci2@unibo.it

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#### Abstract

After a brief historical-methodological overview, this study is meant to prove that the theory of rhetorical genres (deliberative, judicial and epideictic), connected to that of the literary genres, offers scholars more insightful critical opportunities. The *nouvelle rhétorique*, applied to the analysis of rhetorical and literary genres, permits to unveil the argumentative dimension in literature. We have evaluated some passages of the *Decameron* and *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*], two of the great classics of Italian literature, differing by historical settings, genres and contents. The two books have been analyzed from the rhetorical perspective. *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] may be interpreted as an instance of judicial genre, while the *Decameron* as deliberative and epideictic genres.

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#### Key words

rhetoric genres, literature, New Rhetoric, stories, novels

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**BRUNO CAPACI**

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

bruno.capaci2@unibo.it

## The antidote to the fear. The rhetorical genres as a link between literature and society. Examples from Italian literature

### 1. Rhetoric and literature

58 years after its publication, *Le Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique* of Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca still offers valid interpretative paradigms for any model of speech. Also for this reason, the *Traité* was considered a crucial work for rhetoric renaissance (Mortara Garavelli 2010, 1).

Its success never appeased the speeches against rhetoric, mainly in the literary science field, from Tommaseo to Asor Rosa (see Asor Rosa 1991 2009). These attacks on rhetoric, severe and incessant, produced, however, points of interest for its scholars.

Benedetto Croce (1958, 80) recognized that rhetoric had an undeniable value in logic and science fields. That was a very considerable statement, if we think that Perelman studied logic more than literature. It is very revealing also if we consider Galileo's use of rhetoric, who was opposing caricature and banter to Aristotle's summons of his opponents, not to talk about his parables used as *exempla* (Battistini and Raimondi 1990, 198-199). The New Rhetoric re-evaluated the premises of the ancient one, treated as persuasion towards any given argument (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1355b). On the other side, the New Rhetoric accused the ancient one for not having been exhaustive in the analysis of *elocutio*.

The Italian academic milieu, especially the literary one, was open to the influence both of stylistics and rhetoric. In fact, in the second part of 1900s, we see the birth of a purely Italian stylistic school-interacting with philology, grammar and linguistics – building on the German one (magnificently represented by the studies of Spitzer and Auerbach).

The *Nouvelle rhétorique*, leading *logos* – and in general *inventio* – in the foreground, also influenced the literary analysis in Italy. Perelman insisted on the relationship among rhetoric, argumentation and literature. He used a wide range of examples taken from European literature to support the explanation of *loci*,

arguments and figures. In pages of *Nouvelle rhétorique* concerning the use and systematization of *loci* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca [1958] 2013, 96-97), the authors recognized in *loci* of quantity the rhetorical expression of classicism and in those of quality the one of romanticism. On the same path, Curtius (1992, 57) distinguished the classicism of rhetoric from mannerism of the eccentric. Generally, Perelman's studies have given back to tropes their argumentative function. New Rhetoric has helped to restore the dignity of rhetoric. It also contributed to the convergence of rhetoric and literary criticism, meant as a study of style; it has also been involved in the teaching of writing (Marazzini 2001, 248).

It is easy, therefore, to prove the link between rhetoric, literature and society, as well as the interrelation between rhetoric, literature and science. Thanks to rhetoric, literary criticism was motivated to investigate the persuasive reasons of a literary text, especially in its relationship with the public. The interest in inventive power of tropes (Lausberg 1969, 103), the importance attributed to the audience in evaluation of arguments or of the *consuetudo*, the distinction between use and re-use, essential for social sciences (Lausberg 1969, 15-17), are but several manifestations of convergence between literature, science, rhetoric and society.

The studies by Ezio Raimondi and Andrea Battistini unveil a peculiar approach of Italian scholars towards the history of the Italian literature: the investigation on poetics matched with the exploration of rhetoric. Such an approach may be observed from *Rhetorica Dantis [De Vulgari Eloquentia]* till *L'arte di persuadere* by Prezzolini (Battistini and Raimondi 1990). Ezio Raimondi and Andrea Battistini have proven that all Italian literature classics – including Galileo and Manzoni, considered generally to be immune from *loci* and tropes – were actually in debt to the art of eloquence, starting with their challenge of the fallacies of someone else's point of view.

## 2. Dictator and Orator

It is a shared opinion that medieval rhetoric is more interested in poetry and less in oratory, more in the rules of composition of *ars dictandi* than in the speech itself (Marazzini 2001, 39). Nevertheless, it is true that Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* leads back rhetoric to oratory and therefore to the ancient genres of speech: deliberative, judicial and epideictic.

Before Boccaccio, Dante showed in his *Commedia* a great openness to oratory rules, rather than to the exclusive reproduction of moments of *ars dictandi*. The words of damned people, of the blessed ones, as well as of the souls of purgatory were reported in terms of *actio* – eloquence, looks, gestures and even silence (Ferrari 1910, 22) – as well as of the *inventio*, i.e. of *loci* and tropes. Ulysses' simple oration to the sailors in *Canto XXVI* of *Inferno* reveals a different efficacy

if it is analyzed as an argument of contradictions. Such an approach reveals similarities of this oration to that by San Francesco for the soul of Guido da Montefeltro since it also contains the same mechanism: a “*contraddition che nol consente*” (i.e. “the contradiction that concedes nothing”).

In Brunetto Latini’s lesson about Ciceronian vulgarization, the careful reading matched with the care for speeches. Such an approach filled the gap left by the classics who judged that it was a high-style letter, characterized by a high persuasive purpose, which was the essential rhetorical form (Marazzini 2001, 17). Also, Dante considered rhetoricians as *dictators*. *Commedia* could not indeed renounce on eloquence. Damned people, however, do not write or read letters: they express themselves through the eloquence of *pathos*, different from that of *logos*. Indeed, the condition of the damned souls, as well as their words, reveal a tragic nature. Such a condition is best described through *locus* of irreparable (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2013, 91-92), concerning the post mortem definitive state (Auerbach 1979, 79).

Let’s leave Dite and reach Florence to find an enthusiastic reader of Dante: Giovanni Boccaccio. In the streets of the Middle Ages Florence a new oratory affirms itself. Boccaccio is an excellent interpreter of the best Ciceronian rhetoric (Barilli 2003, 25), observer of the human comedy and eloquent advocate of womankind. It is not a coincidence that in his first novel we find the *locus* of irreparable, although applied for comic purposes: the dying Messer Ciapparello uses the persuasive potentiality of the last confession to fool a monk known as a saint.

In the universe of the *Decameron*, the debate and the difference of opinion are part of the lively space of the city, far from the desks of secretaries, but not from the pulpits of preachers, such as the monk, Cipolla. He offers an example of a not *ad rem* rhetoric which perfectly fits the ignorance of his audience. Indeed, orators revive through preachers, too (Marazzini 2001, 164). Boccaccio’s oratory is maybe the best example in the history of European literature that frames the relationship between rhetoric and society. In the *Decameron*, dialogue is omnipresent and incessant. The author orchestrates dialogues of nobles, women, intellectuals, preachers, confessors, even hermits. They all speak. They exist because they speak.

The *Decameron* perspective is humanistic, but not exclusively literary (Barilli 2003, 56). For example, in the *Decameron*, none of Guido Cavalcanti’s sonnets is mentioned, nor a ballad or a song. We can find instead an extemporaneous dialogue with Messer Betto Brunelleschi, characterised by quick lines in a dense back-and-forth ending with a fata enthymeme (Cuomo 1981-82, 256 and Capaci 2010, 79). The innovation in Giotto’s art is mentioned in a short eulogy of Panfilo (Stewart 1986, 85); his energetic way of speaking predominates in the narration. He excels in the astute verbal quarrel, for example when he replies to Messer

Ribatta about their unrecognizability in their rough rain clothes. The short reply that hits the mark and disarms any critiques is a sumptuous suit of a genius.

The *Decameron's* dialogues illustrate also the rhetorical *action*, especially gestures. They apply therefore classical rhetoric, but in an innovative way with respect to the ancient models. The *Decameron's* stories are clearly theatrical (Stewart 1986, 58): they start in a courtroom or in a square, at the bedside of a sick man fooling his confessor, in the tower of a castle from which Messer da Rossiglione's wife is going to throw herself, after that her husband made her cook and eat her beloved's heart (Boccaccio *Decameron*, edition 2013, 778-783).

Contrary to Renato Barilli's (2003, 36) opinion, I do not think that Boccaccio is great only in the various descriptions of the love theme and that he excels only as a "re-maker" of previous stories. He seems to me an accomplished rhetor. It is clearly visible, for example, in Pampinea's speech in one of the *Decameron's* novel. The *incipit* clearly shows that the word of the narrator is not only an instrument for love apologies. Pampinea argues *for* a good life option and *against* the alleged necessity to live with fear of infection and death which provokes devastating emotional effects.

We are going to analyze two important argumentative situations in the *Decameron*: Pampinea's advice to the young friends to leave Florence and a defence of women. The first one is an instance of the deliberative genre, while the second one fits the features of judicial genre. The first one is spoken by Pampinea, the second one by Boccaccio himself and by one of his most eloquent heroines: Ghismunda. Pampinea, who fulfils the aim of persuading her young friends to leave Florence and escape from death. Ghismunda does not obtain from her father the annulment of a written condemnation, but she manages to move and persuade the readers' or readers' community. We infer from her words the ethics of *Stilnovo*, both from the poetic and rhetoric perspective. The latter one is clearly visible in the argument from sacrifice of a woman condemned to death for her will to witness the value of nobility.

### 3. Deliberative genre: Pampinea's advice

Florence in 1348 is being devastated by the Black Plague. As described in the *Decameron*, in the house of God seven women are gathered for the religious service and for talking about what is taking place. The state of total uncertainty, not to say desperation, begs making a decision. The sociological peculiarity of the situation is immediately visible: women can autonomously make decisions, no one gives them any advice, no one takes care of them. But is this a real social innovation?

At the beginning of day 1, Pampinea takes the floor. She is “blooming” as the most skilled and the wisest among women and narrators of the story. Her main feature is outstanding eloquence. Her speech is an example of the deliberative genre: a discussion of what is advantageous or disadvantageous.

Pampinea is talking to her female friends, subjected to the medieval chauvinist society, in which leaving home, even in the danger of death, is illegal for women. She argues that since laws allow self-defence in case of necessity, even at someone else’s damage, then – *argument a fortiori* – this is even more so when saving one’s life is done without harming anyone. The technique of the *argument a fortiori* consists of taking a statement, commonly agreed upon, to reinforce the second one that has even a wider degree of consensus. Pampinea is trying to remind her friends of an elementary truth: saving their own lives is not a crime, it is instead a right and a duty.

Apart from this deductive reasoning, Pampinea also applies the inductive proofs. Using rhetorical *pathos*, she offers a lot of illustrations to make her point clear to her listeners. Pampinea describes a city gripped by disorder and death with punchy examples. Florence is in the hands of *monatti* and gravediggers. It is travelled by bandits who do not o don’t fear laws anymore, since the judges died. Even staying at home is stressful: the survived remember pain and death of their beloved. People are obsessed with death, the ghosts of the departed terrorize the minds of the living ones.

Two key words – honesty and dishonesty – put in *antithesis* by Pampinea constitute the pillars of her speech. The two notions have a richer meaning than nowadays: not only ethic, but also aesthetic. The pestilence produces death as well as dishonesty: in extreme situations people lose their dignity, honor and self-respect. Before dying physically, people die ethically. The city is no more an organized cosmos, but a chaos. Everything seems legitimate, everything can happen. The living fear the bloodthirsty gravediggers; they are afraid of pain and death. A nightmare. The world is upside-down, in the grip of the most desperate compulsions, even the sexual ones. Both in the private houses and in the convents, laymen and the religious people live with no respect of their duties. While waiting for death, they unburden their most shameful instincts and wild fantasies, without taking care of self-respect and honesty.

After all these examples, the question Pampinea addresses is more and more pressing: what are we doing here? What is the meaning of our indecision? Why are we lingering, why do we still resist escaping? Maybe women do not care for their physical and mental health? Or do they think that their lives don’t have to be affected, just as if they were invulnerable? Pampinea is trying to make her friends reason, to let their fears emerge in order to turn them into decision.

It is interesting to notice that the Latin word *consilium* precisely means ‘decision’. Taking Pampinea’s advice, the women have to decide. Pampinea lets them see the reality that terrorizes them and prevents them from reacting. The women rely on Pampinea because they respect her. The authority of the speaker is the rhetorical proof. The listeners let Pampinea move them. She does not need to use *argument ad metum* (‘argument from fear’) – it is not necessary – but she explains a way to escape from such pain. She persuades the audience to think that they are looking at things in the wrong way.

Women realize that so many worthy young people, so many boys and girls in Florence have died. And since they died, how can these women save themselves? *Argument a fortiori* once again. After having disarmed their silent reasons, Pampinea puts in place the *petitio*, the actual advice: leave Florence to go where?

Out of the city there is a world of relief, maybe of salvation. Two different topographies are presented in antithesis: the shocked city from one hand, and the countryside, where the fluttering harvest remind the waves in the sea, from the other. Those who do not know the Tuscan countryside can hardly understand how this imagine of *kosmos*, i.e., of a tidy and natural world, can positively influence people coming from *thanatos*, the world of the dead. In this case, the description reveals all its argumentative power. The world of villas seems uncontaminated if compared to the one of the civic *palagi* (‘palaces’). The contamination is in the countryside, too, but notwithstanding, from a distance, it seems less brutal and virulent. Therefore, the argument goes, once back in their manors and farms, women will find their self-control, a healthy and harmonious life, more acceptable conditions of living and consequently honesty and self-respect.

Pampinea also has a very convincing argument for the reluctant ones. They don’t have to think that they are abandoning someone, since they have already abandoned themselves. Both irreparable and the unthinkable have already taken place. The pestilence made them free not to crawl in the abyss of desperation, but to recover, by themselves, the sense of their human decency and the honor that every woman owes to herself, before men even do.

Pampinea comes to the end of her speech being more incisive, arguing by comparison. From one side, women leave pain, trouble and maybe death. From the other side, they can find everything: their life. At the final stage, an interesting sentence in the form of chiasm appears: the honest leaving is more honorable than the dishonest remaining. Such a formula seals not only the talk, but also the persuasive act in itself.

Boccaccio tells us that women do not only agree with Pampinea’s advice, but that they were also talking about the preparation of their leaving, even while she was speaking. A persuaded woman is immediately involved in what she has to do: she is already acting for her happiness and salvation.



#### 4. Judicial genre: Boccaccio, women's logographer

In day IV of the *Decameron* we can observe the effects of a rhetorical operation of extraordinary complexity and scope. It starts in the *Cornice* and it develops until Ghismunda's speech in the first story.

It is important to underline that Boccaccio does not reserve for women an indiscriminate consent. Some of the feminine models in *Decameron* illustrate more *vituperatio* than *laudatio*. Besides Madonna Oretta or Ghismunda and Griselda, we find Cesca da Celatico or Lisetta di Ca' Quirino, not to talk about Margarita di Talamo d'Imolese, whose celestial beauty, true or supposed, does not fill the gap caused by lack of talent.

Boccaccio's defense of women is not generalized. He elects as co-narrators only great women, yielding them the floor. Before speaking, they feel with their heart and mind. Only on this condition Boccaccio can elect women as judges of his "defense", showing that he can discern beautiful and wise women from only beautiful ones.

In his *Cornice*, Boccaccio speaks directly, taking the floor among all other "narration voices" in defense of the content of his own work. He is taking opportunities given by the story of Filippo Balducci, also known as the story of the ducks. It is the 101<sup>st</sup> story in *Decameron*. Such a construction suggests that the complexity of reality does not lessen or mislead the author's adhesion to abstract rules (Battistini and Raimondi 1990, 68). The fact that the author of *Decameron* writes a story to support his reasons confirms the persuasive use of the short-story genre. It involves dialogues to produce an oratory style, so perfect for the defense, both "slow" and "vehement", of women and of loving condition. Boccaccio creates a 3-acts defense against the attacks of those who reproach him to seek too intensely women's consent and to make them preponderant protagonists of his stories.

First, he puts in place the story of Messer Filippo, who goes to Monte Asinaio to cry in prayers, mourning and fasting his wife's death. He is a citizen who becomes a hermit, attempting to mourn her death and also to cancel women, turning the suffering for his's wife death into a *damnatio memoriae* of the fair sex. His process of withdrawing from the mundane world is in conflict with his son's wish to know the world. It is bad to deny reality and it is unconceivable to make someone else to follow this perversion.

Messer Filippo da Firenze, accompanied by the son, met on his way a group "*di belle giovani donne e ornate*" ['of beautiful, young and adorned women']. In front of such a beauty, the young man forgot any other object of admiration, such as horses or courts, and asked his father the name of such a splendor. The surprised parent could give only absurd replies: he told his son that women were ducks and therefore he should consider them as something bad. Young men are not always

unprepared. They do not accept the film of lies that covers the words said to conceal reality from them. Not at all convinced, he replied: “*O sono così fatte le male cose?*” [‘Are ill things then made after this fashion?’; English translation: *The Decameron*, edition 1886: 191].

The condition of bewilderment and marvel reintroduces the removed object in all his strength. You can cancel the name of women, but not the effect of their presence. The sad and anguishing events of life, such as the loss of the beloved, should not provoke the denial of reality. One cannot just suppress the memory of a person whose voluntary or involuntary absence made us suffer. So, we can say that women are ducks, but they do not cease to be ladies in the imagination of a young boy making his way, under the supervising look of his father, in Florence as well as in any other place and time.

This story is characterized by the evident eroticism of the continued metaphor starting from the series ducks-peck-feed. Filippo’s son would like to take the ducks home and feed them. Filippo, forgetting any reticence and overwhelmed by the same metaphor, silences him saying he is not even able to feed them. In this way, he ends up affirming what he wants to deny: the natural bond between man and woman.

You can steal anybody’s name, both with reticence (Gardin 2015) and with a metalepsis that makes you say you do not even know a person that you despise (Mortara Garavelli 2001, 145). In the case proposed by Boccaccio, it is hard to deny the erotic-natural bond between man and woman, expressed by the continued metaphor. The narrative dictate of this story provides the premise for Boccaccio’s closing in defense of women, who produce in society wisdom of honesty and sense of reality.

Assuming his self-defense, Boccaccio passes from the literary *exemplum*, built on the pedagogic paradox of the son contradicting his father, to the judicial genre, built on the explicit rebuttal of accusations. He defended himself with *allusio*; now he makes explicit the attacks of those who accuse him to be too friendly towards women. Women are Boccaccio’s judges, not his censors, not his Muses. Replying to his “biters,” Boccaccio elects as members of his tribunal those he is accused to love. This is a totally wrong strategy from a processual point of view; it is instead rhetorically correct, because it overturns the critiques of his opponents, entrusting the judgement to those who have been blamed first. Accused to love women, he asks them if this is wrong.

Boccaccio’s speech explicitly applies reticence (Mortara Garavelli 2015, 46), combined with *gradatio* used to applaud women:

[...] lasciamo stare gli amorosi basciari e i piacevoli abbracciamenti e i congiungimenti dilettevoli che di voi dolcissime donne sovente si prendono, ma solamente a aver veduto e veder continuamente [...] la vostra donnesca onestà.

[...] let be the having known the dulcet kisses and amorous embracements and delightsome couplings that are of you, most sweet ladies, often gotten only my having seen and still seeing your dainty manners and lovesome beauty and sprightly grace and above all your womanly courtesy. (English translation: Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, edition 1886, 191)

From *pathos* to *ethos*. The man who really loves women never fears or despises them. He underlines the admiration of feminine honesty. *Stilnovo* finally found his place in Florence, coming down from the Empireo, the reign of Beatrice, to the villas of the Tuscan countryside, dwelling of Fiammetta and her friends.

The *Stilnovists* are called into question as writers, men and lovers. Boccaccio, accused to prefer women as interlocutors in art and life, refuses the accusation through the argument of double hierarchy. Dante, Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia loved women also as old men; why shouldn't he love them? Why should he stay so far from this persuasive example that makes him part of a literary, but also of a human tradition?

This argument can also be considered as an instance of *tu quoque*. Boccaccio calls into question his authors as co-guilty parts in love for poetry as well as for virtues of the power of gazes, words and whispers that women emanate.

Such an admiration makes him say: “*voi mi piacete e io di piacervi mi ingegno*” [‘you please me and I strive to please you’]. This underlines, in the equilibrium of the chiasm, the idea of a perfect reciprocity. It is important to remind that women in *Decameron*, mainly the protagonists of the stories, even when not described physically, are mostly beautiful, wise and prudent (Stewart 1986, 56). Their beauty is often compared to the depicted angels.

Dante, Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia, who love women even when they are old men, should convince the readers as argument for authority and reason for complicity. This might be seen as the acknowledgement of a literary rule. However, Boccaccio is not talking only about Muses. He prefers real women, made of flesh and blood, to use Ghismonda's words to her father, claiming also in this way her loving choice. We are in the crucial point of the first story of the day IV of *Decameron*, when the daughter of the Prenze di Salerno proudly affirms:

*Esser ti dovè, Tancredi, manifesto essendo tu di carne aver generato figliola di carne e non di pietra o di ferro.* (Boccaccio, *Decameron*, edition 2016, 706)

Tancred, being as thou art flesh and blood, that thou hadst begotten a daughter of flesh and blood and not of iron or stone; (English translation *The Decameron*, edition 1886, 196)

It is a masterful use of metonymy, which is the figure that turns abstract thinking into concrete evidence that you can touch with your hand (Fedel 1999, 143). How many times have we listened to this reasoning? Near persons in blood and flesh there exist those on paper, in the novels, or those made of celluloid in films. We

sometimes say we do not have to care about what is happening to a character made of paper. Matter is a way to define an object, to exalt it or to cancel it with an insult.

The story of Ghismunda represents the apex of the Ciceronian Boccaccio, the logographer of women who have no voice, but who listen. For example, Ghismunda, daughter of Tancredi, Prenze di Salerno, is caught by her father in the act of meeting her beloved Guiscardo. She made everything possible to live her love discreetly. Once discovered, she did not deny the evidence or ask compassion. Instead, she admitted the facts with proud passion, claiming in an incisive statement her right to love. The main resource of her speech is *logos* rather than *pathos*. Ghismunda dissimulates the pain she feels, hiding at the same time her fear for the destiny of Guiscardo, in order to keep all her intellectual energy to illustrate her reasons.

The woman's audience is Tancredi, who is at the same time judge and accuser. He is the *pater familias* with the right to let her live or die. No request for clemency, as the Prenze di Salerno, now prosecutor, will end up being accused. The starting point of Ghismunda's oration is the "deliberate counsel in my soul, and most mature advice," the declaration of having assumed consciously and freely the strong decision to love Guiscardo.

Love is not only said: Ghismunda affirms her non-platonic love, asserting that she embraced Guiscardo with consciousness and enjoyed of him with wise perseverance. The indictment is not only admitted, but exceeded and overturned. Tancredi's daughter declares herself guilty to live and she is very proud of it. She does not accept her love to be judged a coward love: she can prove the contrary.

The first witness is Tancredi. He is the one who praised and recommended Guiscardo. Who could she believe if not her father? This is a very incisive use of the argument from authority that highlights the contradiction upon which Tancredi's speech is based. The argument from authority becomes now argument of contradiction and it is used in a favourable way for the cause of Ghismunda and Guiscardo. It is not Guiscardo that cheats Ghismunda, but it's her father when he praised him in front of her.

What is her accusation then? The fact that Guiscardo is not a noble man? But what is nobility if not kindness of heart? The definition (better *definiendum*) establishes the rightness of Ghismunda's choice. She claims her love for Guiscardo and, in the meantime, affirms he is noble, if nobility is a virtue; and if nobility is not a virtue, it's not even nobility. This is an unsettling enthymeme and it completely overwhelms Tancredi's point of view, who still argues the nobility of blood. Ghismunda's speech definitively democratizes *Stilnovo*. It is easy to affirm that love and gentle heart are one and the same. Much more difficult is to love a noble man in his heart, proving with the eloquent sacrifice of life that this is the only real form of nobility to be claimed and to be lived.

After having listened to Ghismunda, it is easier to understand why Boccaccio exposes himself to the critiques of his opponents with an extraordinary rhetorical climax:

*Riprenderanommi, morderanommi laceranommi il corpo del quale il cielo produsse tutto atto ad amarvi e io dalla mia puerizia l'anima vi disposi.* (Boccaccio, *Decameron*, edition 2013, 693).  
Will they, then, blame me, back bite me, rend me with their tongues if I, whose body Heaven created all apt to love you, I, who from my childhood vowed my soul to you. (English translation: *The Decameron* 1886, 192)

## 5. The gap of the infection: *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] and the plague

Manzoni's position about rhetoric is apparently negative. Rhetoric is accused of "tropic hypertrophy," associated with the clumsiness of the manuscript of the Anonymous (Mortara Garavelli 2010, 2). Such an attitude manifests the romantic refusal of rhetoric.

Tommaseo stated the same, disqualifying rhetoric as a worthless artifice, right when the dialectologist Graziadio Ascoli defined it as the main obstacle to the diffusion of the Italian language (Mortara Garavelli 2010, 2). Manzoni did not believe "in the strength of the persuasive word" (Battistini and Raimondi 1990, 311). Acting against the suggestions of the persuasive truth, he only apparently used rhetoric as a demystification of other people's speech.

For example, Renzo Tramaglino, a character from *I promessi sposi*, is an anthropomorphic symbol of a grotesque misunderstanding of truth, deformed by a fallacy. The powerful or the people make of a victim a "potential criminal": Azzecagarbugli identifies him as a scoundrel, the tribunal in Milan states he is a rioter and a dangerous and murky anarchist and the people, fearful of the plague, see him as a shedder. In that case, rhetoric was used to denounce the euphemistic and neglecting attitude of those who do not dare to say the truth and therefore speak too much or too little.

It is enough to listen to the dialogues of Manzoni's novel. Don Abbondio uses the *obscuritas* of the canonical Latin to hide his non-respect of a due act, the celebration of the marriage. Don Rodrigo's bravo's threatened the priest with blasphemies and careful advices. Renzo's silence in the tavern of Gorgonzola unmasks the too many words of the Merchant who declares he is one of the main leaders of the riot in Milan, although he does not know Renzo and cannot even imagine that he is listening to that "political rambling speech." Distrusting other's words, Manzoni implements a procedural strategy that calls every single character as a witness that can be denied by the contest, the speech of the silence of other witnesses, or by the irony of the voice-over.

The pages about the plague bring out the adhesion of the novel to the rhetoric of the judicial genre. They identify the co-responsibility of authority and public opinion, so evident in the too late measures taken against the diffusion of the infection. Furthermore, the novel illustrates the total neglect of truth, which is a “co-ward transaction of words” from both authority and people. The sanitary authorities and the population – who both fear the word “plague” and the consequences of the acknowledgement of the disease: quarantine and *lazaretto* (“field hospital”) – shed responsibilities on each other.

The most innovative aspect of these pages is maybe the recognition of the social risk of an unarmed opinion of the *public spirit* (Habermas 1971, 134), due both to credulity and fanaticism, its consequence. The plague affirms itself through the negation of the very word which refers to it. This confirms that the fear concerns the disease, as well as the name of the sickness itself. As the author puts it:

First, then, it was not the plague, absolutely not—by no means: the very utterance of the term was prohibited. Then, it was pestilential fevers: the idea was indirectly admitted in an adjective. Then, it was not the true nor real plague; that is to say, it was the plague, but only in a certain sense; not positively and undoubtedly the plague, but something to which no other name could be affixed. Lastly, it was the plague without doubt, without dispute. (Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, edition 1972 : 614).

The unreliable and merciless fluctuating crowd messes with Ludovico Settala, the proto-doctor who understood the gravity of the infection, mindful of the previous pestilence. The crowd used the pragmatic argument against him, applied against vaccination by those who think that the rumors about infection are propagated by people operating in that field. The argument has the same stringent logic of those who blame umbrella sellers for the bad weather.

In times of infections, the *consolidation argument* fades. Ludovico Settala, of whom Manzoni described the academic honors, maybe ironically, listing the important chairs to which he was appointed to and all his solemn refusals, paid for the public disfavor. People saw in the features of his severe face the cursed image of an owl and a jinx, as to say that he was the guilty part of the infection.

In some cases, the argument of ridicule initiates the persecution of the opponents. For example, the Jewish people appeared in the grotesque pictures of the Nazi’s caricaturists. In the same way, the public opinion portrayed in *I promessi sposi* expressed the dislike of the scientific advice of the famous doctor. The crowd preferred gratuitous, unfounded solutions, which contributed to put to death an innocent maid accused of witchcraft, since her master fell in love with her and had a stomach-ache. Irony is the trope to which Manzoni is most inclined and attached, although he cultivates its tragic meaning, too.

The judicial aspect of these pages turns into the fervent and lucid denunciation of the processes of the shedders and of the tortures used to extract judicial confessions. The mere fact that *I promessi sposi* edition of '40 was published in a volume with *Storia della Colonna infame*, confirms the adhesion of Manzoni's work to the judicial genre. *I promessi sposi*'s processual structure can be identified, among others, in the call in judgement of its characters. Don Rodrigo is guilty of the rapture of a honest woman, bravoos of menaces and private violence, not to say of attempts of kidnapping. Don Abbondio is guilty of non-compliance of his duties, Renzo of acting like a bravo, of being a dangerous rioter and suspected shedder (although mainly a judicial victim).

The authority in Milan, on its turn, is guilty of misconduct in public office. Innominato evaded justice, becoming a fugitive leading a powerful agency of the organized crime. Fra Cristoforo is a confessed killer who evaded justice, although his moral coherence and his life by God's grace are exalted in the novel as much as the *exemplum* of Padre Felice Casati, the sole character of *I promessi sposi* subject of a mere *laudatio* by Manzoni. Hence, an author – apparently enemy of rhetoric like Manzoni – produces a eulogy of the Capuchin priest who leaded *lazzaretto* in the most intense pages of his novel, conveying the civil complaints. The Capuchin priest has become the “dictator” of five thousand souls in *lazzaretto* only because no one else accepted that task, which was offered to him because it was difficult and dangerous.

Felice Casati is described, according to the models of the Christian hagiography, where *sermo humilis* overturns the ambition of honour, wishing to search glory in a holy death. His and other Capuchins' way of acting, honoured by a sort of collective thanks-giving, is the proof of civil and Christian dedication at the same time. It illustrates also an incessant work, a pragmatic feature of a son of Lombardy. Felice Casati is described in his ceaseless actions in favor of his recipients. The eulogy of virtues reflects in the parallel eulogy of human everyday actions. It replaces the description of miracles and prodigies, often characterizing the panegyric of the saints.

## 6. Conclusions

Facing the infection of the plague and the consequent infection of fear, as the *Decameron* and *I promessi sposi* narrate, rhetoric shows two aspects and produces two actions. On the one hand, it gives suggestions that poison society with shedder-hunt and macabre *humor atrox*, as expressed in the obscene tumults of *monatti* exalting death; on the other hand, it becomes advice in the words of Pampinea, who pushes her friends to leave Florence (deliberative genre); with the narration

voice in *I promessi sposi* it investigates public responsibilities (judicial genre), and finally it praises (epideictic genre) those who defend suffering people when no one cares about them anymore.

Boccaccio's speech in defense of women, analyzed in the central part of the paper, shows that this apology of genre is not only a literary matter: it anticipates the nature of the new society of the Middle Ages: the one of artists and eloquent women. With Boccaccio, the defense of women is no more an exercise of judicial rhetoric, like in the *Eulogy of Elena di Gorgia* from Lentini; it is a turning point in the history of ideas, because it illustrates a vision of the world that gives the floor to those who, until then, were unable to defend themselves against the abuses of brothers, husbands and fathers, not only in a cultural sense.

These two masterpieces of the Italian literature, examined from the rhetoric point of view, reveal their vocation to analyze the word as assumption of responsibility when society becomes a place of mendacity, reticence and of *argumenta ad baculum* and *ad odium*.

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